



APPENDIX A

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APPLICATION FOR LETTERS PATENT

for

A STRUCTURE FOR PRESENTING DESIRED PEPTIDE SEQUENCES

Inventors:

Erwin Houtzager

Irma Maria Caecilia Vijn

Peter Christiaan Sijmons

Attorneys:

Allen C. Turner

Registration No. 33,041

Andrew F. Nilles

Registration No. 47,823

TRASKBRITT

P.O. Box 2550

Salt Lake City, Utah 84110

(801) 532-1922

TITLE OF THE INVENTION
A STRUCTURE FOR PRESENTING DESIRED PEPTIDE SEQUENCES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The invention relates to methods and means for providing binding molecules with improved properties, be it in binding or other properties, as well as the novel binding molecules themselves.

[0002] The invention further relates to methods for applying these molecules in all their versatility.

[0003] In modern biotechnology, one of the most promising and, in a number of cases, proven applications relies on affinity of proteinaceous molecules for all kinds of substances and/or targets. Proteinaceous-binding molecules have been applied in purification of substances from mixtures, in diagnostic assays for a wide array of substances, as well as in the preparation of pharmaceuticals, etc.

[0004] Typically, naturally occurring proteinaceous molecules, such as immunoglobulins (or other members of the immunoglobulin superfamily) as well as receptors and enzymes have been used. Also peptides derived from such molecules have been used.

[0005] The use of existing (modified) natural molecules, of course, provides a limited source of properties that evolution has bestowed on these molecules. This is one of the reasons that these molecules have not been applied in all the areas where their use can be envisaged. Also, because evolution always results in a compromise between the different functions of the naturally occurring binding molecules, these molecules are not optimized for their envisaged use. Typically, the art has moved in the direction of altering binding properties of existing (modified) binding molecules. In techniques such as phage display of (single chain) antibodies, almost any binding specificity can be obtained. However, the binding regions are all presented in the same context. Thus, the combination of binding region and its context is often still not optimal, limiting the use of the proteinaceous-binding molecules in the art.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] The present invention provides a versatile context for presenting desired affinity regions. The present invention provides a structural context that is designed based on a

common structural element (called a "core structure") that has been identified herein to occur in numerous binding proteins. This so-called common core has now been produced as a novel proteinaceous molecule that can be provided with one or more desired affinity regions.

[0007] This proteinaceous structure does not rely on any amino acid sequence, but only on common structural elements. It can be adapted by providing different amino acid sequences and/or amino acid residues in sequences for the intended application. It can also be adapted to the needs of the particular affinity region to be displayed. The invention thus also provides libraries of both structural contexts and affinity regions to be combined to obtain an optimal proteinaceous-binding molecule for a desired purpose.

[0008] Thus, the invention provides a synthetic or recombinant proteinaceous molecule comprising a binding peptide and a core, the core comprising a b-barrel comprising at least 4 strands, wherein the b-barrel comprises at least two b-sheets, wherein each of the b-sheets comprises two of the strands and wherein the binding peptide is a peptide connecting two strands in the b-barrel and wherein the binding peptide is outside its natural context. We have identified this core structure in many proteins, ranging from galactosidase to human (and, e.g., camel) antibodies with all kinds of molecules in between. Nature has apparently designed this structural element for presenting desired peptide sequences. We have now produced this core in an isolated form, as well as many variants thereof that still have the same or similar structural elements. These novel structures can be used in all applications where other binding molecules are used and even beyond those applications as explained herein. The structure comprising one affinity region (desired peptide sequence) and two b-sheets forming one b-barrel is the most basic form of the invented proteinaceous-binding molecules (proteinaceous means that they are, in essence, amino acid sequences, but that side chains and/or groups of all kinds may be present; it is, of course, possible, since the amino acid sequence is of less relevance for the structure to design other molecules of nonproteinaceous nature that have the same orientation in space and can present peptidic affinity regions; the orientation in space is the important parameter). The invention also discloses optimized core structures in which less stable amino acids are replaced by more stable residues (or vice versa) according to the desired purpose. Of course, other substitutions or even amino acid sequences completely unrelated to existing structures are included, since, once again, the important parameter is the orientation of the molecule in space. According to the invention, it is preferred to apply a more advanced core structure than the basic structure, because both binding properties and structural properties can be designed better and

with more predictive value. Thus, the invention preferably provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention wherein the b-barrel comprises at least 5 strands, wherein at least one of the sheets comprises 3 of the strands, more preferably a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, wherein the b-barrel comprises at least 6 strands, wherein at least two of the sheets comprises 3 of the strands. Variations wherein one sheet comprises only two strands are, of course, also possible. In an alternative embodiment, the invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, wherein the b-barrel comprises at least 7 strands, wherein at least one of the sheets comprises 4 of the strands.

[0009] Alternatively, the invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention wherein the b-barrel comprises at least 8 strands, wherein at least one of the sheets comprises 4 of the strands.

[0010] In another embodiment a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, wherein the b-barrel comprises at least 9 strands and wherein at least one of the sheets comprises 4 of the strands, is provided. In the core structure there is a more open side where nature displays affinity regions and a more closed side, where connecting sequences are present. Preferably, at least one affinity region is located at the more open side.

[0011] Thus, the invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, wherein the binding peptide connects two strands of the b-barrel on the open side of the barrel. Although the location of the desired peptide sequence (affinity region) may be anywhere between two strands, it is preferred that the desired peptide sequence connects the two sheets of the barrel. Thus, the invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, wherein the binding peptide connects the at least two b-sheets of the barrel. Although one affinity region may suffice, it is preferred that more affinity regions are present to arrive at a better binding molecule. Preferably, these regions are arranged such that they can cooperate in binding (e.g., both on the open side of the barrel). Thus, the invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, which comprises at least one further binding peptide. A successful core element in nature is the one having three affinity regions and three connecting regions. This core in its isolated form is a preferred embodiment of the present invention. However, because of the versatility of the presently invented binding molecules, the connecting sequences on the less open side of the barrel can be used as affinity regions as well. Also, other exposed sequences can be affinity regions, for instance sequences exposed to the exterior of the core element. This way, a very small bispecific-binding molecule is obtained. Thus, the

invention provides a proteinaceous molecule according to the invention, which comprises at least 4 binding peptides.

[0012] "Bispecific" herein means that the binding molecule has the possibility to bind to two target molecules (the same or different). As already stated, it is an object of the present invention to optimize binding molecules both in the binding properties and the structural properties (such as stability under different circumstances (temperature, pH, etc.), the antigenicity, etc.). This is done, according to the invention, by taking at least one nucleic acid according to the invention (encoding a proteinaceous-binding molecule according to the invention) and mutating either the encoded structural regions or the affinity regions or both and testing whether a molecule with desired binding properties and structural properties has been obtained. Thus, the invention provides a method for identifying a proteinaceous molecule with an altered binding property, comprising introducing an alteration in the core of proteinaceous molecules according to the invention, and selecting from the proteinaceous molecules a proteinaceous molecule with an altered binding property, as well as a method for identifying a proteinaceous molecule with an altered structural property, comprising introducing an alteration in the core of proteinaceous molecules according to the invention, and selecting from the proteinaceous molecules a proteinaceous molecule with an altered structural property. These alterations can vary in kind, an example being a post-translational modification. The person skilled in the art can design other relevant mutations.

[0013] As explained, the mutation would typically be made by mutating the encoding nucleic acid and expressing this nucleic acid in a suitable system, which may be bacterial, eukaryotic or even cell-free. Once selected, one can, of course, use systems other than the selection system.

[0014] The invention also provides methods for producing nucleic acids encoding proteinaceous-binding molecules according to the invention, such as a method for producing a nucleic acid encoding a proteinaceous molecule capable of displaying at least one desired peptide sequence comprising providing a nucleic acid sequence encoding at least first and second structural regions separated by a nucleic acid sequence encoding the desired peptide sequence or a region where such a sequence can be inserted and mutating the nucleic acid encoding the first and second structural regions to obtain a desired nucleic acid encoding the proteinaceous molecule capable of displaying at least one desired peptide sequence and preferably a method for displaying a desired peptide sequence, providing a nucleic acid encoding at least two b-sheets,

the β -sheets forming a β -barrel, the nucleic acid comprising a region for inserting a sequence encoding the desired peptide sequence, inserting a nucleic acid sequence comprising a desired peptide sequence, and expressing the nucleic acid whereby the β -sheets are obtainable by a method as described above. The invention further provides the application of the novel binding molecules in all fields where binding molecules have been envisaged until today, such as separation of substances from mixtures, typically complex biological mixtures, such as body fluids or secretion fluids, such as blood or milk, or serum or whey.

[0015] Of course, pharmaceutical uses and diagnostic uses are clear to the person skilled in the art. In diagnostic uses, labels may be attached to the molecules of the invention. In pharmaceutical uses, other moieties can be coupled to the molecules of the invention. In both cases, this may be chemically or through recombinant fusion. Diagnostic applications and pharmaceutical applications have been described in the art in great detail for conventional binding molecules. For the novel binding molecules according to the invention, no further explanation is necessary for the person skilled in the art. Gene therapy in a targeting format is one of the many examples wherein a binding molecule according to the invention is provided on the gene delivery vehicle (which may be viral (adenovirus, retrovirus, adeno-associated virus or lentivirus, etc.) or nonviral (liposomes and the like). Genes to be delivered are well known in the art.

[0016] The gene delivery vehicle can also encode a binding molecule according to the invention to be delivered to a target, possibly fused to a toxic moiety. Conjugates of toxic moieties to binding molecules are also well known in the art and are included for the novel binding molecules of the invention.

[0017] The invention will be explained in more detail in the following detailed description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1: Domain notification of immunoglobular structures.

[0018] The diagram represents a topology of a protein consisting of 9 beta-elements (indicated 1-9 from N-terminal to C-terminal). Beta-elements 1,2, 6 and 7 (blocked line type) and elements 3,4,5,8 and 9 (straight line type) form two beta-sheets.

[0019] Eight loops (L1-L8) are responsible for the connection of all beta-elements. Loops 2, 4, 6 and 8 are located at the top site of the diagram and this represents the physical

location of these loops in example proteins. The function of loops 2,4 and 8 in light and heavy chain variable domains is to bind antigens (marked with patterned regions). The position of L6 (also marked with a patterned region) also allows antigen-binding activity, but it has not been reported yet as a region with such properties. Loops 1, 3,5 and 7 are located at the opposite site of the proteins.

Figure 2: Schematic 3D topology of immunoglobular domains.

[0020] Nine beta-elements are depicted in the diagram. Each number corresponds to its position in the protein from N- to C-terminal (see, figure 1). Both sets of elements 1, 2, 7 and 6 and 9, 8, 3, 4 and 5 form beta-sheets. The two beta-sheets are located in parallel to each other and are drawn from a top view perspective. The loops that connect the beta-elements are also depicted. Bold lines are connecting loops between beta-elements that are in the top position while dashed lines indicate connecting loops that are located in the bottom position.

Figures 3a and 3b: Schematic 3D-topology of scaffold domains.

[0021] Eight example topologies of protein structures that can be used for the presentation of antigen-binding sites are depicted. The actual core of most scaffolds is formed by 4 beta-elements (2, 3, 7 and 8) arranged in two small beta-sheets formed by, respectively, elements 2 and 7 and by elements 8 and 3. The loops that connect the beta-elements are also depicted. Bold lines are connecting loops between beta-elements that are in the top position while dashed lines indicate connecting loops that are located in the bottom position. A connection that starts dashed and ends solid indicates a connection between bottom and top parts of beta-elements. The numbers of the beta-elements depicted in the diagram correspond to the numbers and positions mentioned in figures 1 and 2. Conserved loops are also indicated (e.g., L2 and L7) and also correspond to the loop numbers in the other figures. Some 3D-structure topologies of putative scaffolds are also present in the natural repertoire. In such cases, one example is given at the bottom of the mentioned figure.

Figure 4: Modular Affinity & Scaffold Transfer (MAST) Technique.

[0022] Putative antigen-binding proteins that contain a core structure as described here can be used for transfer operations. Also scaffold or core structures can be used for transfer actions. The transfer operation can occur between structurally identical or comparable scaffolds

or cores that differ in amino acid composition. Putative affinity regions can be transferred from one scaffold or core to another scaffold or core by for example PCR, restriction digestions, DNA synthesis or other molecular techniques. The results of such transfers are depicted here in a very schematic diagram. The putative (coding) binding regions from molecule A (top part, Affinity regions) and the scaffold (coding) region of molecule B (bottom part, framework regions) can be isolated by molecular means. After recombination of both elements (hybrid structure), a new molecule appears that has binding properties of molecule A and scaffold properties of scaffold B.

Figure 5: Structural alignments of naturally occurring proteins that contain at least a part of an immunoglobular structure.

[0023] Using the VAST protocol (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Structure/VAST/vast.shtml>), it is possible to find identical or partly identical structures. VAST uses an algorithm that can predict the presence of identical elements in presubmitted structures with an example template structure. Here, the structure of 1F2X (SEQ ID NO:8), a functional camelid variable domain (VHH) containing an immunoglobular domain, was chosen as a template to identify naturally occurring proteins in all kinds of organisms that share structural elements. Next, the amino acid sequence of some of the retrieved proteins was aligned. The location of all 9 beta-elements organized in two beta-sheets is indicated by underlining. Some matched proteins contain all 9 beta-elements while others lack one or more of these. Despite the lack of one or more structural components, such proteins still form a basic common structure. Amino acid sequence comparisons show that there is hardly any conservation although the 3D-structures of these proteins is, at least partially, identical. Structurally identical proteins from all kinds of organisms were retrieved this way, varying from bacteria to flies to human.

Figure 6: Topology of a primary scaffold.

[0024] a) Amino acid and corresponding DNA sequences of a primary scaffold in which example CDR regions are inserted. These sets of CDR regions, depicted underlined in the figure, originate from 3 different camelid-derived VHH variable regions, known as 1BZQ, 1HCV and 1MEL.

[0025] b) Amino acid sequence of a primary scaffold that is used to obtain optimal (secondary) scaffolds. Amino acid sequences were obtained using modeling software (Modeller 6.0 and Insight II) in combination with DNA and protein analysis software (Vector NTI suite

7.0, InforMax). Light and heavy chain variable regions were used as a template to design this primary scaffold. The numbers (1-9) indicate beta-elements and L1-L8 indicate loops similarly as described in earlier figures. Underlined regions (L2, L4 and L8) indicate affinity regions located at one site of the proteins. L2, L4 and L8 correspond to the location of CDR regions.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0026] The present invention relates to the design, construction, production, screening and use of proteins that contain one or more regions that may be involved in molecular binding. The invention also relates to naturally occurring proteins provided with artificial binding domains, remodelled naturally occurring proteins provided with extra structural components and provided with one or more artificial binding sites, remodeled naturally occurring proteins disposed of some elements (structural or others) provided with one or more artificial binding sites, and artificial proteins containing a standardized core structure motif provided with one or more binding sites. All such proteins are called VAPs (Versatile Affinity Proteins) herein. The invention further relates to novel VAPs identified according to the methods of the invention and the transfer of binding sites on naturally occurring proteins that contain a similar core structure. 3D modelling of such naturally occurring proteins can be desired before transfer in order to restore or ensure antigen binding capabilities by the affinity regions present on the selected VAP. Further, the invention relates to processes that use selected VAPs, as described in the invention, for purification, removal, masking, liberation, inhibition, stimulation, capturing, etc., of the chosen ligand capable of being bound by the selected VAP(s).

LIGAND-BINDING PROTEINS

[0027] Many naturally occurring proteins that contain a (putative) molecular binding site comprise two functionally different regions: the actual displayed binding region and the region(s) that is (are) wrapped around the molecular binding site or pocket, called the Core Structure (CS), also called scaffold herein. These two regions are different in function, structure, composition and physical properties. The CS structure ensures a stable three-dimensional conformation for the whole protein, and acts as a steppingstone for the actual recognition region.

[0028] Two functionally different classes of ligand-binding proteins can be discriminated. This discrimination is based upon the presence of a genetically variable or invariable ligand-binding region. In general, the invariable ligand-binding proteins contain a

fixed number, a fixed composition and an invariable sequence of amino acids in the binding pocket in a cell of that species. Examples of such proteins are all cell adhesion molecules, e.g. N-CAM and V-CAM, the enzyme families, e.g., kinases and proteases, and the family of growth receptors, e.g., EGF-R and bFGF-R. In contrast, the genetically variable class of ligand-binding proteins is under control of an active genetic shuffling, mutational or rearrangement mechanism enabling an organism or cell to change the number, composition and sequence of amino acids in, and possibly around, the binding pocket. Examples of these are all types of light and heavy chains of antibodies, B-cell receptor light and heavy chains and T-cell receptor alpha, beta, gamma and delta chains. The molecular constitution of wild type CSs can vary to a large extent. For example, Zinc fingers containing DNA-binding molecules contain a totally different CS (looking at the amino acid composition) than antibodies although both proteins are able to bind to a specific target.

SCAFFOLDS (CORE STRUCTURES) AND LIGAND-BINDING DOMAINS

Antibodies obtained via immunizations

[0029] The class of ligand-binding proteins that express variable (putative) antigen-binding domains has been shown to be of great value in the search for ligand-binding proteins. The classical approach to generate ligand-binding proteins makes use of the animal immune system. This system is involved in the protection of an organism against foreign substances. One way of recognizing, binding and clearing the organism of such foreign highly diverse substances is the generation of antibodies against these molecules. The immune system is able to select and multiply antibody-producing cells that recognize an antigen. This process can also be mimicked by means of active immunizations. After a series of immunizations, antibodies may be formed that recognize and bind the antigen. The possible number of antibodies that can be formed due to genetic rearrangements and mutations exceeds the number of 1040. However, in practice, a smaller number of antibody types will be screened and optimized by the immune system. In the isolation of the correct antibody-producing cells and subsequent immortalization of these cells or, alternatively, cloning of the selected antibody genes directly, antigen-antibody pairs can be conserved for future (commercial and noncommercial) use.

[0030] The use of antibodies obtained this way is restricted only to a limited number of applications. The structure of animal antibodies is different than antibodies found in humans. The introduction of animal-derived antibodies in humans will almost certainly cause immune

responses adverse the effect of the introduced antibody (e.g., HAMA reaction). As it is not allowed to actively immunize men for commercial purposes, it is not, or only rarely, possible to obtain human antibodies this way. Because of these disadvantages, methods have been developed to bypass the generation of animal-specific antibodies. One example is the removal of the mouse immune system and the introduction of the human immune system in such mouse. All antibodies produced after immunization are of human origin. However, the use of animals also has a couple of important disadvantages. First, animal care has a growing attention from ethologists, investigators, public opinion and government. Immunization belongs to a painful and stressful operation and must be prevented as much as possible. Second, immunizations do not always produce antibodies or do not always produce antibodies that contain required features such as binding strength, antigen specificity, etc. The reason for this can be multiple: the immune system missed by coincidence such a putative antibody; the initially formed antibody appeared to be toxic or harmful; the initially formed antibody also recognizes animal-specific molecules and, consequently, the cells that produce such antibodies will be destroyed; or the epitope cannot be mapped by the immune system (this can have several reasons).

Otherwise obtained antibodies

[0031] It is clear, as discussed above, that immunization procedures may result in the formation of ligand-binding proteins but their use is limited, inflexible and uncontrollable. The invention of methods for the bacterial production of antibody fragments (Skerra and Pluckthun, 1988; Better et al., 1988) provided new powerful tools to circumvent the use of animals and immunization procedures. It has been shown that cloned antibody fragments (frameworks, affinity regions and combinations of these) can be expressed in artificial systems, enabling the modulation and production of antibodies and derivatives (Fab, VL, VH, scFv and VHH) that recognize a (putative) specific target *in vitro*. New, efficient selection technologies and improved degeneration strategies directed the development of huge, artificial (among which human) antibody fragment libraries. Such libraries potentially contain antibody fragments that can bind one or more ligands of choice. These putative ligand-specific antibodies can be retrieved by screening and selection procedures. Thus, ligand-binding proteins of specific targets can be engineered and retrieved without the use of animal immunizations.

Other immunoglobulin superfamily-derived scaffolds

[0032] Although most energy and effort is put into the development and optimization of naturally derived or copied human antibody-derived libraries, other successful scaffolds have also been described as carriers for one or more ligand-binding domains. Examples of scaffolds based on naturally occurring antibodies encompass minibodies (Pessi et al., 1993), Camelidae VHH proteins (Davies and Riechmann, 1994; Hamers-Casterman et al., 1993) and soluble VH variants (Dimasi et al., 1997; Lauwereys et al., 1998). Two other naturally occurring proteins that have been used for affinity region insertions are also members of the immunoglobulin superfamily: the T-cell receptor chains (Holler et al., 2000) and fibronectin domain-3 regions (Koide et al., 1998). The two T-cell receptor chains can hold three affinity regions each, while for the fibronectin region, the investigators described only two regions.

Nonimmunoglobulin-derived scaffolds

[0033] Besides immunoglobulin domain-derived scaffolds, nonimmunoglobulin domain-containing scaffolds have been investigated. All proteins investigated contain only one protein chain and one to four affinity-related regions. Smith and his colleagues (1998) reported the use of knottins (a group of small disulfide bonded proteins) as a scaffold. They successfully created a library based on knottins that had 7 mutational amino acids. Although the stability and length of the proteins are excellent, the low number of amino acids that can be randomized and the singularity of the affinity region make knottin proteins not very powerful. Ku and Schultz (1995) successfully introduced two randomized regions in the four-helix-bundle structure of cytochrome b562. However, selected binders were shown to bind with micromolar Kd values instead of the required nanomolar or even better range. Another alternate framework that has been used belongs to the tendamistat family of proteins. McConnell and Hoess (1995) demonstrated that alpha-amylase inhibitor (74 amino acid beta-sheet protein) from *Streptomyces tendae* could serve as a scaffold for ligand-binding libraries. Two domains were shown to accept degenerated regions and function in ligand binding. The size and properties of the binders showed that tendamistats could function very well as ligand mimickers, called mimetopes. This option has now been exploited. Lipocalin proteins have also been shown to be successful scaffolds for a maximum of four affinity regions (Beste et al., 1999; Skerra, 2000 BBA; Skerra, 2001 RMB). Lipocalins are involved in the binding of small molecules like retinoids, arachidonic acid and several different steroids. Each lipocalin has a specialized region that

recognizes and binds one or more specific ligands. Skerra (2001) used the lipocalin RBP and BBP to introduce variable regions at the site of the ligand-binding domain. After the construction of a library and successive screening, the investigators were able to isolate and characterize several unique binders with nanomolar specificity for the chosen ligands. It is currently not known how effective lipocalins can be produced in bacteria or fungal cells. The size of lipocalins (about 170 amino acids) is pretty large in relation to VHH chains (about 100 amino acids), which might be too large for industrial applications.

[0034] The VAPs of the invention can be used in an enormous variety of applications, from therapeutics to antibiotics, from detection reagents to purification modules, etc. In each application, the environment and the downstream applications determine the features that a ligand-binding protein should have, e.g., temperature stability, protease resistance, tags, etc. Whatever the choice of the scaffolds is, all have their own unique properties. Some properties can be advantageous for certain applications while others are unacceptable. For large-scale industrial commercial uses, it is crucial that scaffolds contain a modular design in order to be able to mutate, remove, insert and swap regions easily and quickly. Modularity makes it possible to optimize for required properties via standardized procedures and it allows for domain exchange programs, e.g., exchange of premade cassettes. As optimal modular scaffold genes should meet certain features, they have to be designed and synthetically constructed while it is very unlikely that naturally retrieved genes contain such features.

[0035] Besides modularity, there are several other properties that should be present or just absent in the scaffold gene or protein. All scaffold systems that are based on frameworks that are present in natural proteins also inherit their natural properties. These properties have been optimized by evolutionary forces for the system in which this specific protein acts. Specific properties encompass, for example, codon usage, codon frequency, expression levels, folding patterns and cystein bridge formation. Industrial commercial production of such proteins, however, demands optimal expression, translation and folding to achieve economic profits. Not only should the genetic information be compatible and acceptable for the production organism, protein properties should also be optimal for the type of application. Such properties can be heat sensitivity, pH sensitivity, salt concentration sensitivity, proteolytic sensitivity, stability, purification possibilities, and many others.

[0036] Thus, to be of practical use in affinity processes, specific binding activity alone is not sufficient. The specific binding agent must also be capable of being linked to a solid

phase, such as a carrier material in a column, an insoluble bead, a plastic, metal or paper surface, or any other useful surface. Ideally, this linkage is achievable without any adverse effects on the specific binding activity. Therefore, the linkage is preferably accomplished with regions in the VAP molecule that are relatively remote from the specific affinity regions.

[0037] An important embodiment of the invention is an affinity-absorbant material comprising a specific binding agent immobilized on a porous silica or the like, the specific binding agent comprising a selection of VAP molecules.

[0038] A particularly important embodiment of the invention is an affinity-absorbant material comprising a special binding agent immobilized on a porous carrier material, such as silica or an inert, rigid polymer or the like, having a pore size of at least 30A but not greater than 1000A, wherein the specific binding agent comprises a selection of VAP molecules. Preferably, the carrier has a pore size of at least 60A. Preferably, the pore size is not greater than 500A and, more preferably, not greater than 300A.

[0039] The pore size of a carrier medium such as silica or inert polymers can be determined using, e.g., standard size exclusion techniques or other published methods. The nominal pore size is often referred to as the mean pore diameter and is expressed as a function of pore volume and surface area, as calculated by the Wheeler equation (MPD= (40,000 x pore volume)/surface area). The pore volume and surface area can be determined by standard nitrogen absorption methods of Brunauer, Emmett and Teller.

[0040] Products in which VAPs can be applied in a way that leaves the VAPs present up to, and also including, the end product have examples from a very wide range of products. But also in processes where the VAPs are immobilized and preferably can be regenerated for recycled use, the major advantage of VAPs is fully exploited, i.e. the relatively low cost of VAPs that makes them especially suitable for large-scale applications, for which large quantities of the affinity bodies need to be used. The list below is given to indicate the scope of applications and is in no way limiting. Product or process examples with possible applications in brackets are:

[0041] (1) Industrial (food) processing such as the processing of whey, tomato pumice, citrus fruits, etc. or processes related to bulk raw materials of agricultural origin such as the extraction of starch, oil and fats, proteins, fibers, sugars, etc., from bulk crops such as, but not limited to: potato, corn, rice, wheat, soybean, cotton, sunflower, sugar beet, sugar cane, tapioca, rape. Other examples of large process streams are found in the dairy-related industries, e.g., during cheese and butter manufacturing. As the VAPs can be used in line with existing

processing steps and the VAPs do not end up in the final product as a result of their irreversible immobilization to support materials, they are exceptionally suited for the large-scale industrial environments that are customary in agro-food processing industries.

[0042] In a more detailed example, the whey fraction that is the result of the cheese manufacturing processes contains relatively large number of low-abundant proteins that have important biological functions, e.g., during the development of neonates, as natural antibiotics, food additives, etc. Examples of such proteins are lactoferrin, lactoperoxidase, lysozyme, angiogenine, insulin-like growth factors (IGF), insulin receptor, IGF-binding proteins, transforming growth factors (TGF), bound- and soluble TGF-receptors, epidermal growth factor (EGF), EGF-receptor ligands, and interleukin-1 receptor antagonist. Another subclass of valuable compounds that can be recovered from whey is the immunoregulatory peptides that are present in milk or colostrum. Also, specific VAPs can be selected for the recovery of hormones from whey. Examples of hormones that are present in milk are: prolactin, somatostatin, oxytocin, luteinizing hormone-releasing hormone, thyroid-stimulating hormone, thyroxine, calcitonin, estrogen, and progesterone. Other examples where the VAPs are exceptionally suitable are large-scale affinity chromatography applications where purification of a target compound is limited for economic reasons; the cost of purification becomes too high in relation to the price of the purified compound. A very significant cost reduction can often be achieved through a reduction of the number of purification steps by a far more selective purification step that is based on specific affinities such as those displayed by VAPs. In some examples, single-step purifications are even feasible, where the target compound is directly purified to acceptable levels from the originating process stream (e.g., single-step enzyme purification from extracellular culture media or cell extracts of industrial production microorganisms or other cell-based production methods).

[0043] (2) Edible consumer products such as ice cream, oil-based products such as oils, margarines, dressings and mayonnaise, other processed food products such as soups, sauces, prefabricated meals, soft drinks, beer, wine, etc. (preservation and prevention of spoilage through direct antibiotic activity or selective inhibition of enzymes, protecting sensitive moieties during processing, e.g., from enzymes or compounds that influence quality of end products through its presence in an active form, or for enzymes that preferably need to be active downstream of a denaturing process step and where the binding with specific VAPs would prevent the active site of the enzyme from being denatured), controlled release of flavors and

odors, molecular mimics to mask or enhance flavors and odors, e.g., masking or removing bitter components in beer brewing industries, and removal of pesticides or other contaminants.

[0044] (3) Personal care products such as shampoos, hair-dyeing liquids, washing liquids, laundry detergents, gels, as applied in different forms such as powder, paste, tablet, or liquid form, etc. (antimicrobial activity for inhibition of dandruff or other skin-related microbes, anti-microbial activity for toothpastes and mouthwashes, increased specificity for stain-removing enzymes in detergents, stabilizing labile enzymes in soaps or detergents to increase, e.g., temperature or pH stability, increased binding activity for hair-dye products, inhibiting enzymes that cause body odors, either in skin applications or in clothing accessories such as shoe inlays, or hygiene tissues).

[0045] (4) Non-food applications such as printing inks, glues, paints, paper, hygiene tissues, etc. (surface-specific inks, glues, paints, etc., for surfaces that are otherwise difficult to print, e.g., most current plastics, but especially those that are based on polyofines bottles or containers, or for surfaces where highly specific binding is required, e.g., lithographic processes in electronic chip manufacturing, authentication of value papers, etc.).

[0046] (5) Environmental protection processes such as water purification, bioremediation, clean up of process waters, concentration of contaminants (removal of microorganisms, viruses, organic pollutants in water purification plants or, e.g., greenhouse water recycling systems, or removal of biological hazards from air-ventilation ducts).

[0047] (6) Animal feed products in dry or wet forms (removal, masking or otherwise inhibiting the effects of anti-nutritional factors that often occur in feed components both for cattle and fish farming, notably protease inhibitors or negative factors such as phytic acid, addition of VAPs as antimicrobial agents to replace current antibiotics with protein-based antibiotics).

[0048] Although the preferred embodiments of this patent include industrial processes, the use of VAPs in a manner of affinity chromatography is certainly not limited to these applications. On the “low volume / high value” side of the scale, a variety of applications is feasible for pharmaceutical, diagnostic and research purposes where price is of lesser importance for application, but the availability of VAPs against ligands that are notoriously difficult to raise antibodies against in classical immune responses. Also the small size and high stability will provide “low volume / high value” applications where VAPs are superior to conventional antibodies or fragments thereof.

[0049] (7) Pharmaceutical applications where VAPs can be used as therapeutics themselves, particularly when the core is designed to resemble a naturally occurring protein, or to identify and design proper affinity regions and/or core regions for therapeutics.

[0050] (8) Diagnostic applications where VAPs, as a result of their 3D structure that differs in essential ways from commonly used antibodies or antibody fragments, may detect a different class of molecules. An example is the detection of infectious prions, where the mutation causing the infectious state is buried inside the native molecule. Conventional antibodies can only discriminate the infectious form under denatured conditions, while the small and exposed ARs of VAPs are able to recognize more inwardly placed peptide sequences.

[0051] (9) Research applications where VAPs are bound to, e.g., plate surfaces or tissues to increase detection levels, localize specific compounds on a fixed surface, fix tracer molecules in position, etc., or where selected genes that code for specific VAPs are either transiently, continuously or in a controlled manner expressed by translating the genes in a cellular environment, and where, through their targeted expression, functional knockouts of target molecules are formed. For example, mimicking a receptor ligand may interfere with normal signal-transduction pathways, or VAPs that function as enzyme inhibitors may interfere with metabolic pathways or metabolic routing.

[0052] Diverse as the above examples are, there are commonalities in the ways that VAPs can be applied, as is illustrated by the following categories that form a matrix in combination with the applications:

[0053] 1. Affinity chromatography where VAPs are immobilized on an appropriate support, e.g., in chromatography columns, that can be used in line, in series or in carrousel configurations for fully continuous operation. Also pipes, tubes, in-line filters, etc. can be lined with immobilized VAPs. The support material on which the VAPs can be immobilized can be chosen to fit the process requirements in terms of compression stability, flow characteristics, chemical inertness, temperature, pH and solvent stability, etc. Relatively incompressible carriers are preferred, especially silica or rigid inert polymers. These have important advantages for use in industrial-scale affinity chromatography because they can be packed in columns operable at substantially higher pressures than can be applied to softer carrier materials such as agarose. Coupling procedures for binding proteins to such diverse support materials are well known. After charging the column with the process stream of choice, the bound ligands can be desorbed from the immobilized VAPs through well-known procedures

such as changes in pH or salt concentrations, after which the VAPs can be regenerated for a new cycle. The high stability of selected VAPs makes them exceptionally suitable for such repeated cycles, thus improving the cost efficiency of such recovery and purification procedures. The principles and versatility of affinity chromatography have been widely described in thousands of different applications.

[0054] 2. Insoluble beads are a different form of affinity chromatography where the support material on which VAPs are immobilized is not fixed in position but is available as beads from for example , silica, metal, magnetic particles, resins and the like that can be mixed in process streams to bind specific ligands in, e.g., fluidized beds or stirred tanks, after which the beads can be separated from the process stream in simple procedures using gravity, magnetism, filters, etc.

[0055] 3. Coagulation of target ligands by cross-linking the ligands with VAPs, thereby reducing their solubility and concentrating the ligands through precipitation. For this purpose, VAPs should be bivalent, i.e., at least two ARs must be constructed on either side of the scaffold. The two ARs can have the same molecular target but two different molecular targets are preferred to provide the cross-linking or coagulation effects.

[0056] 4. Masking of specific molecules to protect sensitive moieties during processing steps to increase the stability of the target ligand for adverse pH, temperature or solvent conditions, or to increase the resistance against deteriorating or degrading enzymes. Other functional effects of molecular masking can be the masking of volatile molecules to alter the sensory perception of such molecules. In contrast, the slow and conditional release of such molecules from VAPs can be envisaged in more downstream processing steps, during consumption or digestion, or after targeting the VAPs-ligand complex to appropriate sites for biomedical or research applications. Also molecular mimics of volatile compounds using VAPs with specific receptor binding capacity can be used to mask odors from consumer products.

[0057] 5. Coating of insoluble materials with VAPs to provide highly specific surface affinity properties or to bind VAPs or potential fusion products (i.e., products that are chemically bound to the VAPs or, in case of protein, are co-translated along with the VAPs in such a manner that the specificity of the VAPs remains unchanged) to specific surfaces. Examples are the use of VAPs to immobilize specific molecules to, e.g., tissues, on plates, etc., to increase detection levels, localize specific compounds on a fixed surface, fix tracer molecules in position, etc.

[0058] Certainly not all natural CSs are interesting from a commercial and/or industrial point of view. For example, the stability and sensitivity of the whole protein should meet the requirements that go along with the proposed application. Ligand-binding proteins in an acidic environment are not *per se* useful in high salt or high temperature environments. It is not possible to design one scaffold that has all possible features to function as a one-for-all scaffold. For example, there are applications that require proteolytic insensitive scaffolds while other applications require specific protease cleavage sites in the scaffold. For these and many other applications, it is not possible to design one scaffold that meets all requirements. However, most differences in scaffold function have to do with properties of the amino acid that are exposed on the outside of the protein. For example, pH effect, proteolytic recognition and cleavage, solubility, expression levels, antigenicity and many more features mostly have to do with amino acid side chain properties instead of the core of the scaffold and the backbone. Changing the properties of these amino acids will typically have a minor effect on the overall structure of a scaffold. Thus, it is possible to change application forms by changing the quality of amino acids located on the outside of the scaffold or of those amino acids that are not involved in ligand-binding or structure determination. With this in mind, it is possible to design and construct scaffolds that can be used in multiple kinds of ligand-binding environments without changing the properties and spatial position of the ligand-binding domain. A consequence of this idea is that affinity domains can be swapped from one scaffold to another scaffold, if the scaffolds contain similar CSs, without losing their specificity for the ligand. We call this swapping technology Modular Affinity and Scaffold Transfer technology (MAST technology).

Adapting scaffolds and affinity regions through mutations.

[0059] One method to introduce random mutations in pieces of DNA is the introduction of inosine residues in DNA fragments. Inosine is widely used as a residue in sequencing methods and degenerated primers. Inosine is a form of deoxy-nucleotide-tri-phosphate that can be incorporated in DNA fragments without disturbing the overall DNA structure, but it lacks side groups that are responsible for H-H bridge formation. Typically, adenine can form two H-H bridges with thymidine while cytosine can form 3 H-H bridges with guanidine; their pairs being oppositely positioned. Therefore, inosine can be found opposite to A, C, G or T. The effect of inosine in DNA strands is that it will not contribute to the melting temperature of the DNA fragment. If inosine is introduced in DNA strands, cellular DNA repair

mechanisms will try to correct this and replace the inosine with the corresponding complementary required nucleotide of the opposite DNA strand. However, under *in vitro* conditions, environmental systems determine the acceptance, incorporation or removal of inosine residues. For example, proofreading DNA polymerases are able to correct DNA strands for inosine residues but non-proofreading polymerases lack this property.

[0060] In DNA amplification reactions, inosine residues can be introduced at random during the formation of a new strand of DNA. Most non-proofreading polymerases (even thermostable ones) can also, by chance, incorporate inosine residues, instead of one of the four regular dNTPs, at random positions during the second strand assembly. During further steps, a random regular nucleotide can be placed at the base site opposite to the inosine residue. The number of mutations is Gaussian distributed. Factors that can influence the relative number of mutations are PCR cycle number, concentration of dITP, concentration of regular dNTPs, polymerase properties, DNA concentration and PCR buffer composition. An optimized procedure can be applied to every stretch of nucleotides flanked by one or more primer regions.

[0061] Inosine-based mutational strategies have been reported for a couple of target sequences. The inosine procedure has a couple of explicit important features: it does not introduce frameshifts, it keeps the original length of the DNA fragments, it is unbiased for the mutational position, it is (relatively) unbiased for the mutational type (dNTP type), it is easy to perform, it is controllable and it is applicable to every part of DNA that can be amplified. The effects of the mutated DNA can be: change in DNA properties (e.g., promoter elements), RNA stability and, most important for our purposes, changes in amino acid composition and sequence of the DNA fragment. By influencing the number of mutations and the domains of mutations, new protein domain properties can be generated. By controlling the relative number of changes, it is possible to keep the overall amino acid composition. This way, structurally important amino acids or stretches of amino acids within the corresponding mutated domain can be kept for a certain percentage of the obtained clones. However, the random introduction of inosine can also, by coincidence, result in the introduction of undesired stop codons. By controlling PCR conditions, it is possible to restrict the average number of stop codons. In addition, selection procedures (frame and stop codon dependent) and the use of specific strains that can overrule specific stop codons, e.g., amber or ochre mutations in specific *E.coli* strains, can at least partly compensate for the effect of the putative introduced stop codons.

[0062] The consequence that only a limited number of amino acids will be changed creates a new approach in the generation of randomization in for example affinity regions (e.g., CDR3). Now structural information and/or critical residues or properties at certain positions, in at least a significant percentage of clones formed using dITP mutations, can be conserved and can be extremely important in building high quality antibody libraries.

[0063] The combination of a method for producing in-frame mutations within certain predetermined regions using PCR or other techniques that include inosine residues and the possibility to (functionally) screen large numbers of mutants makes an excellent and powerful combination not only in optimizing affinity regions in antibodies but also in other affinity regions or even in the optimization in the functionality or specificity of proteinous domains. In addition, the combination of these techniques can be used to optimize functional domains in stretches of DNA or RNA, for example, promoter, UTR, leaders, structural units, transcription initiation and transcriptional termination, translational effects, etc.

[0064] The size of the region that can be affected by the inosine mutational method is not restricted as long as the DNA fragment can be amplified.

[0065] In a specific example, it is possible now to generate structures, based on a template, that have new, improved or adapted properties that were not present in the original template, such as optimal temperature sensitivity, optimal protease resistance, optimal ligand binding, optimal ligand specificity, optimal pH sensitivity, optimal solubility, optimal expression, optimal translation, optimal secretion, optimal codon usage, optimal functionality, etc., in which the term "optimal" represents the optimal configuration for a certain application (both positive and negative).

CORE STRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

[0066] In commercial industrial applications, it is very interesting to use single chain peptides, instead of multiple chain peptides because of low costs and high efficiency of such peptides in production processes. One example that could be used in industrial applications is the VH antibodies. Such antibodies are very stable, can have high specificities and are relatively small. However; the scaffold has evolutionarily been optimized for an immune-dependent function but not for industrial applications. In addition, the highly diverse pool of framework regions that are present in one pool of antibodies prevents the use of modular optimization

methods. Therefore, a new scaffold was designed based on the favorable stability of VHH proteins.

[0067] 3D-modeling and comparative modeling software was used to design a scaffold that meets the requirements of versatile affinity proteins (VAPs). Because it is not possible yet to predict protein structures, protein stability and other features, it is necessary to test the computer-designed and modeled scaffolds. Multiple primary scaffolds were constructed and pooled. All computer-designed proteins are just an estimated guess. One mutation or multiple amino acid changes in the primary scaffold may make it a successful scaffold or make it function even better than predicted. To accomplish this, the constructed primary scaffolds are subjected to a mild mutation program. Hereto, the inosine-dependent mutational technology is applied. Inosine insertions at random positions can ultimately change the amino acid compositions and amino acid sequences of the primary scaffolds. This way, new (secondary) scaffolds are generated. In order to test the functionality, stability and other required or desired features of the scaffolds, a set of known affinity regions is inserted in the secondary scaffolds. All functional scaffolds that display the inserted affinity regions in a correct fashion will be able to bind to the ligand that corresponds to the inserted affinity regions. Phage display techniques help to conserve the genetic and phenotypic information of the scaffolds. After panning procedures, optimal and functional scaffolds are retrieved. These scaffolds can be used for the insertion of new affinity regions.

INITIAL AFFINITY REGIONS FOR LIBRARY CONSTRUCTION

[0068] In the present invention, new and unique affinity regions are required. Affinity regions can be obtained from natural sources, degenerated primers, or stacked DNA triplets. All of these sources have certain important limitations as described above. In our new setting, we designed a new and strongly improved source of affinity regions which have less restrictions, can be used in modular systems, are extremely flexible in use and optimization, are fast and easy to generate and modulate, have a low percentage of stop codons, have an extremely low percentage of frameshifts and wherein important structural features will be conserved in a large fraction of the new formed clones and newly structural elements can be introduced.

[0069] The major important affinity region (CDR3) in both light and heavy chains in normal antibodies has an average length of between 11 (mouse) and 13 (human) amino acids. Because in such antibodies the CDR3 in light and heavy chains cooperatively function as an

antigen binder, the strength of such a binding is a result of both regions together. In contrast, the binding of antigens by VHH antibodies (Camelidae) is a result of one CDR3 regions due to the absence of a light chain. With an estimated average length of 16 amino acids, these CDR3 regions are significantly longer than regular CDR3 regions (Mol. Immunol. Bang Vu et al., 1997, 34, 1121-1131). It can be emphasized that long or multiple CDR3 regions have potentially more interaction sites with the ligand and can therefore be more specific and bind with more strength.

[0070] Average lengths of the major affinity region(s) should preferably be about 16 amino acids. In order to cover as many potentially functional CDR lengths as possible, the major affinity region can vary between 1 and 50 or even more amino acids. As the structure and the structural classes of CDR3 regions (like for CDR1 and CDR2) have not been clarified and understood, it is not possible to design long affinity regions in a way that the position and properties of crucial amino acids are correct. Therefore, most libraries were supplied with a completely degenerated region in order to find at least some correct regions.

[0071] In the invention, we describe the use of naturally occurring VHH CDR3 regions as a template for new affinity regions. CDR3 regions were isolated from mRNA coding for VHH antibodies originating from various animals of the camelidae group by means of PCR techniques. Next, this pool of about 108 different CDR3 regions, which differ in the coding for amino acid composition, amino acid sequence, putative structural classes and length, is subjected to a mutational process by PCR amplification that includes dITP in the reaction mixture. The result is that the most products will differ from the original templates and thus contain coding regions that potentially have different affinity regions. Other very important consequences are that the products keep their length, the pool keeps its length distribution, a significant part will keep structurally important information while others might form non-natural classes of structures, the products do not or only rarely contain frameshifts and the majority of the products will lack stop codons. These new affinity regions can be cloned into the selected scaffolds. The newly constructed library can be subjected to screening procedures similar to as regular libraries known by an experienced user in the field of the art.

AFFINITY MATURATION

[0072] After one or more selection rounds, an enriched population of VAPs is formed that recognizes the ligand selected for. In order to obtain better, different or otherwise changed VAPs against the ligand(s), the VAP coding regions or parts thereof can be the subject of a

mutational program by several means. Beside chain shuffling, error prone PCR strategies or mutator strains, the inosine-dependent mutational technology can be applied. Due to the modular nature of the VAPs, parts of the VAP can be used in the last-mentioned mutational technology. Several strategies are possible. First, the whole VAP or VAPs can be used as a template. Second, only one or more affinity regions can be mutated. Third, framework regions can be mutated. Fourth, fragments throughout the VAP can be used as a template. Of course, iterative processes can be applied to change more regions. The average number of mutations can be varied by changing PCR conditions. This way, every desired region can be mutated and every desired level of mutation numbers can be applied independently. After the mutational procedure, the newly formed pool of VAPs can be rescreened and reselected in order to find new and improved VAPs against the ligand(s). The process of maturation can be restarted and reapplied as many rounds as necessary.

[0073] The effect of inosine-dependent mutation is that not only affinity regions 1 and 2 with desired affinities and specificities can be found but also that minor changes in the selected affinity region 3 can be introduced. It has been shown that mutational programs in this major ligand-binding region can strongly increase ligand-binding properties. In conclusion, the invention described here is extremely powerful in the maturation phase.

EXAMPLES

Example 1.

INTRODUCING NEW BINDING AND/OR OTHER PROPERTIES OF OBTAINED CAMEL ANTIBODIES.

[0074] Lama pacos lymphocytes are obtained by isolating lymphocytes via a discontinuous gradient of Ficol (Pharmacia Biotech). Five ml heparin lama blood is diluted with 5 ml phosphate buffered saline (PBS) and applied on the top of 4 ml Ficol. After centrifugation for 20 minutes at 1000g without brakes, an interphase will form mainly containing lymphocytes. This fraction is isolated and diluted with PBS to 50 ml and the cells are pelleted at 1000g by centrifugation for 10 minutes. The supernatant is discarded and the cells are lysed in Tri-Pure (Roche Diagnostics) using a teflon piston and the mRNA is isolated according to the manufacturer's protocol. Two micrograms mRNA are reverse transcribed using oligo-dT primers and AMV reverse transcriptase (Roche-Diagnostics) according to the manufacturer's procedure.

Five microliters of the obtained cDNA is directly used in a PCR amplification reaction for 30 cycles at 93°C for 15 seconds, 50°C for 20 seconds, 70°C for 60 seconds with a mixture containing 250nM forward and backward primers (ordered at Genset), 100 micromolar PCR grade dNTPs (Roche-Diagnostics), 2.5 units High Fidelity Taq mix (Roche-Diagnostics) and the supplied buffer including magnesium sulphate. The produced products are separated on a 1% agarose Tris Buffered EDTA (TBE) gel and cut out and purified using Qiagen PCR purification methods. The isolated PCR products are used in mutational PCR reactions. The cycles are repeated 10 times using the same temperature and time conditions as described above in the RT-PCR reaction. The mixtures contain dITP concentrations varying from 1 micromolar to 200 micromolars, 10 micromolars dNTPs, 2.5 unit Taq (Roche-Diagnostics), and 5' biotin-labeled primers at 250nM each (same primer sequences as mentioned above). The formed PCR products are purified using a biotin purification kit according to the manufacturer's procedures. Inosines are replaced by adding short, random phosphorylated oligomers to the template. This mixture is heated and cooled down to room temperature. After the addition of buffer, dNTPs, DNA T4 ligase and the klenow fragment DNA polymerase and an incubation at room temperature, a proofreading polymerase is added to replace the inosines of the template DNA that are now paired with a non-inosine-containing duplicate build from the random oligos and filled in with the polymerase. Isolated products are re-PCR'd for 10 cycles according to the first PCR schema with the exception that the primers now contain a unique restriction site at the 5 prime end to enable unidirectional cloning. After amplification the biotin-labeled template used in this PCR reaction is removed using the above-mentioned method. Amplified products are purified using a Qiagen PCR purification kit and digested with appropriate restriction enzymes. Next, the gel-separated, cut-out and repurified DNA fragments are ligated in a bla-containing (ampicillin resistance gene) phage display expression vector with the M13 g3 protein in frame along with a His tag, a detection tag (HA or VSV) and a proteolytic site (trypsin) which are located in between the PCR cloning site and the g3 open reading frame. After electroporation of the ligation products in TG1 E.coli, cells are grown on plates that contain 4% glucose, ampicillin and 2*TY-agar. Harvested cells are used to infect with the kanamycin-bearing VCSM13 helper phage (Stratagene). Helper phage-infected cells are grown in 2*TY/ kanamycin/ ampicillin on a 200 rpm shaking platform at 30°C for 8 hours. Next, the bacteria are removed by pelleting at 20000g at 4°C for 30 minutes. The supernatant is filtered through a 0.45 micrometer PVDF filter membrane (MilliPore). Poly-ethylene-glycol and NaCl are added to a final concentration of the

flow through to respectively 4% and 0.5M. This way phages will precipitate on ice and can be obtained by centrifugation. The phage pellet is solved in 50% glycerol/50% PBS and stored at -20°C. Panning is performed by diluting about 10^{13} stored phages in 10ml PBS/0.5% gelatine. The antigen is coated on 2 types of immunotubes, low charged and high charged tubes (Greiner). After a blocking period of 2-8 hours at 4°C, the phage mixture is added and incubated on a slowly rotating platform at 4°C for 60 minutes. The immunotubes are washed 5 times with PBS/0.5% gelatine and 5 times with PBS/0.05% tween-20. Bound phages are eluted with 0.1M glycine pH 2.2 (HCl) for 1 minute and the eluted fluid is neutralized with Tris 8.8. Ten volumes of XL1-blue cells at OD 0.1-0.3 are infected with the neutralized phage solution. After infection, the cells are plated on 2*TY agar/ ampicillin/tetracycline/4%glucose plates and grown overnight at 37°C. Repanning can be performed until a desired number of cycles or colonies or individual or pooled colonies can be screened for inserts and/or binding capacity and antigen specificity. Growth of individual or pooled clones and the formation of chimeric phages is basically the same as growing a whole bank of phages. After phage precipitation, the phages are added to coated and blocked ELISA plates in order to bind to the target antigen, followed by extensive washing steps similarly as described above. Anti-M13-HRP antibodies (Pharmacia Biotech) are added (1:5000) to test the number of bound phages (in relation to control wells in the ELISA plate). After a 30 minute binding period and a tenfold wash procedure with PBS/0.05% tween-20, the HRP-coated antibodies against M13 phages are detected using TMB or other ELISA-reader and HRP compatible reagents. The binding properties are read in means of staining and staining intensity. Strong signals indicate strong binding. Selected clones can be remutated using the above-described dITP method or other mutational strategies in order to improve binding and/or other properties.

Example 2.

DESIGN OF A MAXIMAL PRIMARY SCAFFOLD

[0075] A primary scaffold is designed as a template to generate secondary scaffolds with improved properties or features by mutational strategies. A primary scaffold design has to meet some desired criteria. First, it should be highly soluble, very stable and easy to fold. The solubility of proteins can be changed, for example, by changing amino acids that have side chains that are exposed to the environment. Hydrophilic amino acids like lysine, aspartic acid, arginine, histidine, serine, threonine or glutamic acid can improve the solubility. The stability

and folding properties can be improved by the addition of intra-molecular bonds. The most powerful bond is found in sulphide-bridges between two opposed cysteine residues. However, bacterial cells, in contrast to prokaryotic cells like yeast cells, can have problems with cysteine bridge formations and, therefore, only a limited number of cysteine bridges should be incorporated in proteins that have to be expressed in bacterial cells. Because the used scaffold is structurally based upon immunoglobular domains, and because at least some bacterial proteins contain such structures or deviations of these, one can incorporate the structural and amino acid sequence knowledge of these proteins into new scaffolds that are based upon these structures. Using Modeller 6.0, Insight II individual or stretches of amino acid changes were checked for stability prognoses in comparative modeling situations. Especially the outer amino acids of the structures were initially modeled. Vector NTI suite 7.0 software was used to design the corresponding DNA sequences including codon optimizations for *E.coli* cells and the incorporation of desired restriction sites. Variable regions from human, mouse and lama (especially VHH) have been used as a template to design a new scaffold. This scaffold therefore contains 9 beta-elements (see, figures 1 and 2) arranged in 2 beta-sheets. The four even-numbered loops can form a binding region on one side of the scaffold (for example, as found in antibodies) while the odd-numbered loops on the other side of the scaffold can be used for a binding region for another or even the same molecule. From all models that were created using comparative modeling software, the following primary scaffold with 9 beta-elements was chosen based on energy minimization, potential folding properties, potential solubility and potential stability (SEQ ID NO:1 and SEQ ID NO:2 connected by (NNN)X):

[0076] N V K L V E K G G N F V E N D D D L K L
 AATGTGAAACTGGTTGAAAAAGGTGGCAATTCTCGCAAAACGATGACGATCTTAAGCTC
 T C R A E G * * * * * Y C M G W F R Q A
ACGTGCCGTGCTGAAGGTNNNNNNNNNNNNNTACTGCATGGTTGGTCCGTCAGGCG
 P N D D S T N V A T I L * G S T Y Y G D
CCGAACGACGACAGTACTAACGTGGCCACGATCTTANNGGGAGCACGTACTACGGTGAC
 S V K E R F D I R R D * * * N T V T L S
TCCGTCAAAGAGCGCTTCGATATCCGTCGCACNNNNNNNAACACCGTTACCTTATCG
 M D D L Q P E D S A E Y N C A G S * Y
ATGGACGATCTGCAACCGGAAGACTCTGCAGAATACAATTGTGCAGGTTCT(NNN)XTAC
 H Y R G Q G T D V T V S S
CACTACCGTGGTCAGGGTACCGACGTTACCGTCTCGTCG

[0077] The underlined regions indicate the four affinity regions as depicted in figure 1. Although variations in length can occur in all affinity regions, the fourth underlined affinity region can tolerate extensive length variations (1-more than 40 amino acids). In figure 6a, an example of this primary scaffold is depicted which has been adapted for CDR regions with known antigen-binding properties (affinity regions 1,2 and 4). These affinity regions originate from lama-derived VHH antibody fragment clones 1HCV, which can bind human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG), those of 1MEL, which can bind lysozyme, and the CDR regions of 1BZQ, which have been shown to bind bovine RNase A. The depicted DNA sequences in figure 6a have been ordered at Genset's. The synthetically produced DNA sequences are tested for their binding properties. Therefore, the DNA fragments are cloned into a phage display vector as described in example 1. Phage production and panning experiments are also performed as described above with the exception that the coating of immunotubes is done with, respectively, bovine RNase A, HCG or lysozyme. Binding phages are eluted and individual clones are tested for their sequence. In order to improve the scaffold, a mutational program is started as described in example 1, preferably using the dITP method.

Example 3.

DESIGN OF A MINIMAL PRIMARY SCAFFOLD

[0078] A minimal scaffold is designed according to the requirements and features as described in example 2. However, now only four and five beta-elements are used in the scaffold (see, figure 3a). In the case of 4 beta-elements, amino acid side chains of beta-elements 2, 3, 7 and 8 that are forming the mantle of the new scaffold need to be adjusted for a watery environment. The same is true for the side chains of amino acid in beta-elements 2, 4, 7 and 8 in the case of a 5 beta-element-containing scaffold. The Fc-epsilon receptor type alpha (structural code 1J88 at VAST) is used as a template for comparative modeling to design a new, small scaffold consisting of 4 beta-elements. For the five beta-element-containing scaffold, immunoglobulin killer receptor 2dl2 (VAST code 2DLI) is used as a structural template for modeling.

Example 4.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF SCAFFOLDS

[0079] In order to verify the crystal structure of scaffolds and isolated binding proteins generated via the above-mentioned examples, crystallographic methods are applied. However, it is known that not all proteins can be crystallized (about 50%) and, thus, not all proteins can be analyzed this way. Because the core of the proteins should consist of beta-elements and beta-sheets, circular dichroism (CD) spectroscopy is used to test the presence of beta-structures.

Example 5.

IMPROVING PROPERTIES OF A SCAFFOLD FOR APPLICATIONS

[0080] For certain applications, the properties of a scaffold need to be optimized. For example, heat stability, acid tolerance or proteolytic stability can be advantageous, or even required, in certain environments in order to function well. A mutational and re-selection program can be applied to create a new scaffold with similar binding properties but with improved properties. In this example, a selected binding protein is improved to resist proteolytic degradation in a proteolytic environment. A mixture or a cascade of proteases or the environment of the application is used to select for stability. First, the selected scaffold is mutated using the above-mentioned dITP methods (example 1) or other mutational methods. Next, a phage display library is built from the mutated PCR products so that the new scaffolds are expressed on the outside of phages. Next, the phages are added to the desired proteolytic active environment for a certain time at the future application temperature. The remaining phages are isolated and subjected to a panning procedure like described above (example 1). After extensive washing, bound phages are eluted, infected in *E.coli* cells that bear F-pili and grown overnight on an agar plate containing the appropriate antibiotics. Individual clones are re-checked for their new properties and sequenced. The process of mutation introduction and selection can be repeated several times or other selection conditions can be applied in further optimization rounds.

Example 6.

RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) BY PCR USING dITP

[0081] The MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) is amplified with the T7 (5' AATACGACTCACTATAG 3' (SEQ ID NO:6)) and the T3 (5' ATTAACCCTCACTAAAG 3' (SEQ ID NO:7)) primer(Isogen) in the following polymerase chain reaction (PCR): 50 ng of vector DNA is amplified by Taq DNA polymerase (0.3 units per reaction, Promega) in a 50 ml

reaction containing 50 ng of T3 and T7 primer, 2 mM MgCl₂, 10mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.3), 50 mM KCl, 200 μ M dNTPs (Roche Diagnostics) and with or without 200 μ M dITP (Boehringer). After 30 cycles (45 sec 94 °C, 45 sec 44 °C and 45 sec 72 °C) (Primus 96^{plus}, MWG-Biotech), a part of the PCR products is digested with the endonucleases XbaI, PstI, EcoRI, Xho I (Gibco BRL; 20 units per reaction) and run on a 2.5 % agarose gel, while the rest of the PCR products are cloned into the vector pGEMTeasy (Promega) and sequenced. The PCR products produced in the absence of dITP are digested completely, while the PCR products produced in the presence of dITP are only partly digested, showing mutagenization of the recognition site of the endonuclease.

Example 7.

CONTROLLED RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) WITH A DIFFERENT NUMBER OF PCR CYCLES IN THE PRESENCE OF dITP

[0082] Amplification of the MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ is performed as in example 6 with the following modifications: the number of PCR cycles is varied from 5, 10, 20 to 30 cycles. The PCR products are treated as in example 6. The PCR products produced after 5 PCR cycles in the presence of dITP are nearly completely digested, but the PCR products produced after 30 cycles are clearly partly digested. The ratio between undigested and digested products increases with the number of PCR cycles. The different PCR products show an increase in the number of random mutations in the PCR products generated with a higher number of cycles.

Example 8.

CONTROLLED RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) WITH A DIFFERENT RATIO OF dNTPS AND dITP

[0083] Amplification of the MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) is performed as in example 6 with the following modifications: The concentration of dNTPs is varied from 20 μ M, 40 μ M, 100 μ M to 200 μ M and the dITP concentration is set at 200 μ M. After 30 PCR cycles, the products are digested as in example 6 and separated on a 2.5 % agarose gel. The higher the ratio of dITP:dNTPs, the more undigested product is present. The products show more mutations when generated with a higher ratio of dITP:dNTPs.

Example 9.

CONTROLLED RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) WITH A DIFFERENT CONCENTRATION OF dITP

[0084] Amplification of the MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) is performed as in example 6 with the following modifications: The concentration of dITP is varied from 0 μ M, 100 μ M to 200 μ M and the dNTP concentration is set at 100 μ M. After 30 PCR cycles, the products are digested as in example 6 and separated on a 2.5 % agarose gel. Undigested products are detected in the PCR products produced in the presence of dITP. The ratio between undigested versus digested products increases with a higher dITP concentration. The products show a higher number of mutations when produced in the presence of a higher concentration of dITP.

Example 10.

CONTROLLED RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) WITH dITP BY USING DIFFERENT DNA POLYMERASES

[0085] Amplification of the MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) is performed as in example 6 with the following modifications: in addition to the Taq DNA polymerase, DNA polymerases with proofreading such as pwo and Deep Vent are used for amplification. The PCR products are treated as in example 6. More undigested product is detected in the products generated with DNA polymerases having no proofreading activity. The PCR products show more mutations when generated by DNA polymerases with no proofreading activity.

Example 11.

CONTROLLED RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF MULTIPLE CLONING SITES (MCS) WITH A DIFFERENT CONCENTRATION OF ONE OF THE dNTPS

[0086] Amplification of the MCS of vector pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) is performed as in example 6 with the following modifications: four parallel PCR reactions are performed in which, in each reaction, the concentration of one of the dNTPs is lowered to 20 μ M, while the concentration of the other three nucleotides is set at 200 μ M. The concentration of dITP is 200 μ M in all reactions. The results show that, preferably, nucleotides compatible to the nucleotide present at a low concentration are mutated.

Example 12.

CLONING OF INOSINE-CONTAINING PCR PRODUCTS

[0087] Products that contain substantial numbers of inosine residues appeared hard to clone. All tested DNA polymerases fail to extend if inosine residues are present in the template. Therefore, inosine residues should be replaced or strands containing inosine residues should be copied otherwise. To overcome this problem, we melted inosine-containing templates in the presence of phosphorylated random oligomers (7-20 mers). Now primers can anneal randomly over the inosine-containing spot and thus a random nucleotide can be present opposite to the inosine residue. The addition of a non-proofreading polymerase, sufficient dNTPs, ATP and a DNA ligase can result in the formation of a template-based DNA copy without inosines in it. After treatment with a proofreading DNA polymerase, inosines are replaced with normal nucleotides. After amplification and cloning of the products, high levels of mutations can be obtained. This whole process of inosine-based mutations can be repeated with or without prior cloning steps until desired levels of mutations are obtained.

Example 13.

RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF CDR REGIONS

[0088] Forward and reverse primers that anneal at -20 and +20 bp, respectively, around the CDR3 region of lama-derived 1HCV, 1MEL and 1BZQ are used for amplification of this CDR region in the presence of dITP as described in examples 6 and 12. These PCR products are cloned and sequenced as described in example 6. Random mutations are detected in the CDR3 region.

Example 14.

RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF A MIXTURE OF CDR REGIONS

[0089] Forward and reverse primers that anneal around CDR3 regions are used for amplification of these CDR regions in the presence of dITP as described in examples 6 and 12. The PCR products are cloned and tested for binding properties as described in examples 1,6 and 12. Random mutations are obviously present in at least part of all newly generated CDR3 regions.

Example 15.

RANDOM MUTAGENESIS OF SCAFFOLD

[0090] Primers annealing at the 5 prime and 3 prime ends of the scaffold sequence are used in the presence of dITP as described in examples 6 and 12. These PCR products are cloned and sequenced as described in examples 6 and 12. Random mutations are detected in the amplified and cloned fragments.

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